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Heroes, Territory, and Identity

The idea that ancient Greek hero cult was closely tied to public and private territorial claims during the period of the rise of the *polis* has been discussed in a number of studies in the last twenty-five years. Related to this discussion has been the question of whether cult activity at Bronze Age tombs during this period constituted or was a predecessor to hero cult. This paper will re-examine the relationship of tomb cult to hero cult and the connection of both to territorial claims. It will argue that a close connection between hero cult and territory continued to exist during the Archaic and Classical periods and that the very nature of hero cult itself explains this connection. By examining a number of incidents from ancient literature, I will show that during the Archaic and Classical periods there was a clear link in the Greek mind between the ideas of territory, identity, and hero cult.

Studies by Antonaccio, Malkin, and de Polignac have stressed the association of hero cult with territory, but this association was not limited to the earliest periods. In addition to other functions, heroes continued to have territorial associations as long as they received cult. Due to the nature of hero cult itself and to Greek *polis* religion, hero cults were well suited to represent claims to territory and serve as symbols of group identity. Because the cult of a hero was localized, usually to the area around his grave, he came to be seen as the protector of that particular area. The Olympian gods might be worshipped by all Greeks, but heroes belonged to a locality and their worship formed part of a region's identity. This made them uniquely suited to put forward claims to territory and identity which could not be made as appropriately by divine cults.

The importance of heroes in the sixth and fifth centuries as symbols of territorial rights and identity can be seen in a number of incidents recorded by the ancient sources. Athens is tied to a whole series of claims to Salamis through the use of heroes and their cult. Cleisthenes of Sicyon is famous for using hero cult in his attempt to break all ties to Argos (Hdt. 5.67). Cleisthenes of Athens used heroes as symbols of the new Athenian tribal divisions (Hdt. 5.66). The transfer of the bones of Orestes from Tegea to Sparta can be seen as an attempt to legitimize Spartan efforts to dominate Tegea (Hdt. 1.67) and the transfer of the bones of Theseus from Scyros to Athens can similarly be seen as an attempt to legitimize Athenian possession (Plut. *Theseus* 36; *Cimon* 8). Another incident linking hero cult, identity, and territory is the transfer of the bones of Rhesos from the Troad to Amphipolis by Hagnon (Polyaenus 6.53).

These and many other incidents show that heroes were identified with particular localities and groups, which led to their involvement in rivalries between states and claims to territory. Hero cults stopped being used in this manner only when the political realities of the Hellenistic and Roman periods made inter-*polis* rivalry unprofitable. For this reason I would also argue that the majority of incidents of bone transferal are to be dated no later than the fourth century.